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Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and the World View of the Late Enlightenment

J. G. A. POCOCK

IN THAT OTHERWISE MEMORABLE YEAR, 1776, Edward Gibbon published the first volume of *The Decline and Fall*, carrying the narrative to the conversion of Constantine and concluding with the two famous chapters on the rise of Christianity. In 1781, he published the second and third volumes, carrying the narrative to the deposition of Romulus Augustulus and concluding with a chapter which anatomizes Merovingian Gaul, Visigothic Spain, and Anglo-Saxon Britain, and is itself closed by what is really a separate essay—the “General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West.” The three remaining volumes—which are concerned less with the Latin-Germanic West than with the “world’s debate” between Byzantium and Islam in the East—did not appear until 1788. Gibbon died in 1794, at the outset of what would otherwise have been an exile from his beloved Lausanne occasioned by the wars between old Europe and revolutionary France. These dates reveal that *The Decline and Fall* is in chronology a product of the last years of the Enlightenment, the uneasy years between the American and French revolutions; this essay will examine the respects in which it is that also in spirit.¹

Gibbon was a conservative in politics if a radical modernist in philosophy and religion, and his scholarship belonged in some ways to a generation earlier than his own: to Oxford—however he may

¹ This paper was originally read to the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association, meeting in San Diego on 19 August 1976. It develops and elaborates some points put forward in “Between Machiavelli and Hume: Gibbon as Civic Humanist and Philosophical Historian,” *Daedalus*, 105, No. 3 (Summer 1976), 153–70, and adds some not made there. This issue of *Daedalus*, edited by G. W. Bowersock and John Clive, is devoted to “Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.” I hope to complete a full-length study, to be entitled *Barbarism and Religion: Civil History in Gibbon's Decline and Fall*.

have disliked it in his own time—of the Ancients against the Moderns and to Paris of the great years of the Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles Lettres. But it is possible to disentangle from his volumes a historical sociology—or “philosophy of history” as the age would have it—based on the most advanced ideas of the French² and Scottish Enlightenments: on Buffon and Mably rather than Montesquieu—whom he greatly admired—and on David Hume and Adam Smith rather than Voltaire—whom he came in the end to despise. And this sociology is also an ideology; that is, it presents a clear image of the world view of the Late Enlightenment—its view of its own place in history and of the forces which threatened its future. Gibbon was sometimes evasive, but he was never complacent; he knew very well why he should think of civilizations as fragile, and the most he allowed himself to hope was that in the greatest of catastrophes, there were gains this side of savagery which could never be entirely lost. But it cannot be without a sense of irony and pathos that we read the words in which, on 1 May 1788, he presented his last volumes to the public and wondered aloud if he would write any more history: “I am fairly entitled to a year of jubilee; next summer and the following winter will rapidly pass away.”³ Within not much more than a year, Gibbon’s Europe was to be destroyed by events which he certainly did not foresee; but in examining the fears for the future which he did entertain and temperately consider, we may inquire not only into the extent of his pessimism, but into the extent to which his fears foreshadowed what was to come.

Peter Gay has termed the Enlightenment “the rise of modern paganism,” and it could not have persisted without that profound concern for the ancient world which moved Gibbon to write his history. The rejection of Gallican and Tridentine Catholicism, Calvinist and sectarian Protestantism, necessitated the erection of a secular ideal which found its location in the ancient city. In Voltaire and Hume, as well as in Gibbon, we find an avowed preference for

² For Gibbon’s relation to French thought see the contributions of Robert Shackleton, Giuseppe Giarrizzo, Jean Starobinski, and Frank E. Manuel to the issue of *Daedalus* just mentioned; and Giuseppe Giarrizzo, *Edward Gibbon e la cultura europea del Settecento* (Bari, 1954).

³ *Decline and Fall*, Vol. IV (1788), v (introduction). Subsequent references to *The Decline and Fall* are given as “DF,” followed by the chapter number, and the volume and page number in the fifth edition of J. B. Bury (London, 1902–09). The quotation above may be found at Bury, I, xiii.

Greco-Roman polytheism as permitting philosophy to develop independently of the gods, whereas the assertion—whether Platonic or Semitic—of a single godhead condemned it to the embrace of theology. Ancient philosophy, in the proper sense, is therefore a problem for Gibbon; since by “philosophy” he means nothing more or less than a methodical skepticism which frees the mind for its proper concerns, he is obliged to recognize it only in Lucretius or Cicero, and to dismiss the whole Athenian and Alexandrian endeavor as metaphysics and *esprit de système*.⁴ The revival of Platonism ranks among the forces which destroyed ancient civilization, and seems at times an agency even more subversive than the Christian combination of revelation with superstition. Gibbon comes nearest to a tragic awareness when he finds himself obliged to condemn the Emperor Julian—for whom he felt something like love—as a neo-Platonic metaphysician and magician who betrayed the philosophic paganism he struggled to revive, and the inferior of Athanasius in statemanship and public morality.⁵

It is possible to discover the sociology of religion—even the sociology of ideas—which enabled Hume and Gibbon to explain why the philosophy that flourished in an age of superstition must be flawed by systematization and metaphysics. Before we do so, however, we must consider the second reason why the secular ideal of the Enlightenment had to be located in the ancient city. Philosophic man in a secular universe must act and contemplate the reasons for his actions, and it was in Athens and Rome that the philosophy of this combination had been worked out with the greatest finality. The hatred of metaphysics, however, combined with a Polybian veneration for the laws and arms of Rome, ensured that political philosophy would be admired in its Roman and Stoic rather than its Athenian and Academic form; the ideal city of the Enlightenment is populated not by illumined and contemplative philosopher kings, but by judiciously skeptical senators and magistrates. In consequence, the Anglo-French Enlightenment (including its American variant) was condemned to carry on the civic humanist and classical republican tradition of the Renaissance, and to see the failure of ancient philosophy as one with the failure of ancient politics.

⁴ *DF*, ii (Bury, I, 30). See also Gibbon's *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, chs. xlvii, lxxx, *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon*, Vol. IV (London, 1814).

⁵ *DF*, xxi–xxiii; see particularly Bury, II, 361–81, 432–50, 473–78.

This does not mean that all *philosophes* were doctrinaire republicans: Voltaire remained in spirit a man of the *grand siècle* and the *thèse royale* to the end of his days. But it does mean that every *philosophe* was in some degree involved in the contradictory vision of history which arose from accepting the Montesquieuan premise that virtue was the principle of republics; Gibbon, as we shall see, was no exception, and *The Decline and Fall* is written around this thesis. Ideally to be virtuous—as either the Renaissance or the Enlightenment understood this crucial term—a man should be the citizen of a republic.⁶ Property should give him independence and the ability to bear arms in the city's cause, and the community of arms-bearing proprietors should be the community of citizens obedient to the laws which they themselves made. The citizenry might be distributed into an aristocracy and a democracy, and a superstitious many might worship gods whom a philosophic few knew to be only modes of worshipping the city, but this did not detract from civic virtue so long as there was equality in arms and under the laws. The philosopher needed to be a senator, but was quite content to be a citizen. The element of contradiction in this vision—in which the Enlightenment was deeply entangled—arose from the republic's historical fragility. The republic was vulnerable to corruption, to political, moral, or economic changes which destroyed the equality on which it rested, and these changes might occur not accidentally, but in consequence of the republic's own virtue. Because it was virtuous it defeated its enemies; because it defeated its enemies it acquired empire; but empire brought to some citizens—chiefly military commanders and economic speculators—the opportunity to acquire power incompatible with equality and uncontrollable by law, and so the republic was destroyed by success and excess. This was why Gibbon's original Capitoline vision of writing the history of the decline and fall of the city became a commitment to write the history of the decline and fall of the empire; quite simply, the empire had absorbed the city and destroyed its virtue, as Polybius had prophesied, Sallust and Tacitus had narrated, Machiavelli and Montesquieu had analyzed, and it is why his final verdict on the Western empire was that “the story of its ruin is simple and obvious . . . the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness.”⁷

⁶ This theme is developed in J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975).

⁷ *DF*, xxxviii (Bury, IV, 161).

But had this been all, Gibbon's history would have been an essentially simple narrative of the effects of corruption—a corruption arising from the separation of civil from military virtue, started by Marius and Sulla, completed by Caesar and Pompey, and institutionalized by Augustus, under whom the military institution began to govern the empire independently of the republic and so embarked on the long history of its own decay. This is Gibbon's narrative; it is his explanation, whenever he pauses to look back and analyze the Decline since the conquests of the republic. To the extent that this is so, he is still writing in the tradition of Tacitus whom he admired above any other historian; he can see only one locus of civic virtue, only one city destroyed by interaction with its empire, and Alexandria and Constantinople are part of the ruin because they are not cities in the political sense and have no virtue. But in fact this is not all. By the time we reach the "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West," from which the last quotation was taken, we know that the theme of corruption does not explain everything, and that there are strands in Gibbon's pattern with which the "General Observations" themselves—found slightly disappointing by nearly every reader—fail to deal. The corruption of the republic and the principate will not explain why Gibbon persisted in his design—after hesitation—through three more volumes of mainly Eastern history, or why, seven years later and near the end of his labors, he was moved to the famous remark that he had "described the triumph of barbarism and religion."⁸ To find the strands in the pattern from which these concepts emerge, we must return first to the instability of virtue, and second to the relation between virtue and philosophy; and at each point we shall encounter Gibbon's response to the greatest mind of his generation, that of David Hume, to whom he paid the highest compliment in his power by calling him "le Tacite de l'Ecosse."⁹

It was not only the mutation of republic into empire as the main theme of ancient history which impressed the eighteenth-century mind with a sense of the mutability of virtue. It was widely held that virtue had subsequently been restored in a barbaric form by the Gothic and Germanic invaders, who had set up primitive but effective communities of armed freeholders, to which feudal relationships had been no more than marginal. There are traces of this perspective

⁸ *DF*, lxxi (Bury, VII, 308–9).

⁹ J. E. Norton, ed., *The Letters of Edward Gibbon* (London, 1956), II, 107.

in Gibbon's first volume: he tells us that "the fierce giants of the north broke in and . . . restored a manly spirit of freedom; and after the revolution of ten centuries, freedom again became the happy parent of taste and science."¹⁰ But the image of Gothic freedom, like that of primitive Roman virtue, rested on the assumption that the form of property which gave the individual arms and independence, liberty and virtue, must necessarily be land; and since the last years of the seventeenth century, it had been a commonplace to inquire what had been the consequence of the rise of commerce and of movable forms of property at the end of the supposedly agrarian Middle Ages. A quarrel of the ancients and moderns ensued: to some it seemed that the rise of commerce had spelled the end of virtue, as formerly free arms-bearing citizens had become content to pay mercenaries to defend them and absolute monarchs to govern them, the better to enjoy the wealth, leisure, and cultivation which commerce made possible. To these ancients—Thomas Jefferson among them—Europe under the enlightened monarchies was like Gibbon's age of the Antonines, enjoying an interlude of prosperity and politeness under the protection of a military establishment which law and liberty no longer controlled, and which must sooner or later become tyrannous and degenerate. But there were moderns—Defoe, Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, and Gibbon—who conceded that virtue had rested upon a foundation of arms and agriculture, but insisted that this Spartan, Roman, or Gothic virtue had been so inhumanly harsh and restrictive as hardly to deserve the name; hence, they said, the nightmare utopias of Lycurgus' laws or Plato's republic.¹¹ The rise of commerce and culture had been worth the loss of virtue which it had entailed; it had vastly enhanced the human capacity for production and consumption, exchange, interdependence, and sympathy, and on this foundation there might be erected new ethical systems which displayed how man's love of himself might be converted into love of his fellow social beings. But the ancient image of virtue was never overthrown or abandoned, and in consequence it had to be recognized that the virtue of commercial and cultivated man was never complete, his freedom and independence never devoid of the elements of corruption. No theory of human progress could be constructed which did not carry the

¹⁰ *DF*, ii (Bury, I, 58).

¹¹ Montesquieu, *Esprit des Lois*, IV, 6, 8; V, 19; XX, 1; *Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 491–92.

negative implication that progress was at the same time decay, that culture entailed some loss of freedom and virtue, that what multiplied human capacities also fractured the unity of human personality. The philosophers of the Enlightenment had not restored this unity, but had learned to live, resignedly or hopefully, with personalities sundered by history. They were already finding themselves cast in the role of Faust to the Mephistopheles of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Gibbon, in this analysis, emerges as a modern, and one relatively untroubled by the accusing finger of Rousseau; Lausanne was at a safe distance from Geneva. That is, he accepts the thesis that the Decline and Fall was ultimately due to the expansion of the empire, the professionalization of the armies, the institution of the principate and the decay of virtue, but, while he agrees that commerce, politeness, and luxury grew up behind the shield of the principate and the legions, he will not accept that luxury is to be considered a major cause of the Decline. There were more radical contemporaries who held that it was the affluent society which paid mercenaries to defend it, so that wealth was a cause of the loss of virtue; in their view of Roman history, the rise of the mercenary legions went together with the rise of the *equites* and the *publicani*, and they started from Sallust rather than from Tacitus. Gibbon—though he had written an essay about the dubious financial dealings of the tyrannicide hero Brutus¹²—resisted this interpretation. He was regularly at pains to point out that it was despotism, not luxury, which corroded the ability of ancient society to defend itself, and that the relation between despotism and luxury was not a simple one. When he paused, in the chapter which recounts Alaric's sack of Rome, to review the last stage in the history of the senatorial aristocracy, he made or strongly implied two striking points: the first, that the luxury of the senators was the effect of their living in an economy of conspicuous consumption, not of profitable exchange; the second, that if we look back into the primitive age of republican virtue, we find that the warrior yeoman was regularly plunged into debt because he preferred going off with the legions and seizing the lands of others to peaceably increasing by industry the yield of his own farm.¹³ Virgil's *Georgics*—Gibbon had written in his youth—were written at

¹² "Digression on the Character of Brutus," *Miscellaneous Works*, IV, 95–111.

¹³ *DF*, xxxi (Bury, III, 292–95, 302–3); *Daedalus*, pp. 162–65.

Augustus' instance to persuade the soldier-farmer to civilize himself.¹⁴ We can infer from this that Gibbon was awake to the modern argument—found in Defoe, Montesquieu, Hume, and others—that ancient virtue was warlike because it was economically primitive, and that a productive market economy had no need of virtue in this sense and would not be corrupted by its disappearance.

An implication would be that eighteenth-century commercial Europe was not threatened, like Rome, by corruption from within. Gibbon in 1781 had some personal motivation for presenting this argument. The author, possibly Charles James Fox, of some satiric verses on Gibbon's dual role as historian of the Roman empire and parliamentary placeman under the North administration had written: "His book well describes / How corruption and bribes / O'erthrew the great empire of Rome; / And his writings declare / A degen'racy there / Which his conduct exhibits at home."¹⁵ The revolt of the American provinces, as a matter of historical correctness, faced Britain with a Social War rather than a Decline and Fall, and came about precisely because the institutions of British liberty had not been merged in those of imperial government; but it would not have been surprising if Gibbon had been at pains to destroy the very fashionable, almost radical-chic, parallel between contemporary Britain or Europe and Sallustian or Tacitean Rome. We have found that he had the means of doing so. But his historical intellect was a good deal stronger than its ideological promptings, and when we reach the "General Observations" at the end of Volume Three, we find this theme present indeed, but played down almost to vanishing point. Gibbon does indeed stress that the late empire was a military despotism which had destroyed its own capacity to replace and renew its virtue, whereas modern Europe is, he says, a great republic,¹⁶ composed of diverse states which by emulation maintain each other's military virtue—though he also says that the advanced technology of war has rendered this virtue neither possible nor necessary¹⁷—correct each other's forms of government, and by trade

¹⁴ *Essai*, pp. xix–xxii; *Miscellaneous Works*, IV, 32–37.

¹⁵ There are various printings of these verses, of which the first ("King George, in a fright / Lest Gibbon should write / The story of Britain's disgrace . . .") is the best known. They are said to have been written in Fox's copy of *The Decline and Fall*, and found there when his books were auctioned.

¹⁶ *DF*, xxxviii, "General Observations" (Bury, IV, 163).

¹⁷ *DF*, xxxviii (Bury, IV, 166–67).

and competition strengthen each other's economies.¹⁸ In this peaceable and progressive society, military and political virtue are, in a way which recalls Montesquieu, kept at a level of moderate but not essential importance, and there is no need to worry too much about their necessary imperfection. But what renders the "General Observations" puzzling and disappointing to most readers is, one suspects, that this theme is dealt with in terms far less of internal decay than of the extreme improbability of barbarian assault from without. Gibbon elects to consider how Europe would stand up to a new nomad invasion, though he prefaces his observations with the admission that the Russians and the Chinese have reduced the nomads to a species verging on extinction.¹⁹ American critics like to believe that he did this in order to avert his eyes from the painful spectacles of Saratoga and Yorktown;²⁰ but it is hard to find that the British cared enough about America to experience its loss as a trauma, and this emphasis on the nomads can be explained—the explanation will be partly ideological—in terms of Gibbon's developing ideas on the sociology of barbarism.

Theorists in search of a modern equivalent for ancient virtue had already placed themselves on a road which, for Anglophones at any rate, led from John Locke to Adam Smith. The mind formulated its ideas in response to the sensations and objects encountered in experience; as men advanced in productive capacity through the successive stages of history, they enlarged their own minds by multiplying the objects to which they responded. In chapter nine of *The Decline and Fall*, Gibbon reviewed Tacitus' *De moribus Germanorum* in the light of this body of theory. The Germans were savages, he said, possessed of neither money nor letters, the media of exchange which multiplied and preserved the objects nourishing the mind,²¹ and this was the case because their social condition was preagricultural.²² They neither labored nor produced, and were consequently totally incapable of contemplation and almost incapable of action. Self-awareness was an existential burden of which they could dis-

¹⁸ *DF*, xxxviii (Bury, IV, 165–66).

¹⁹ *DF*, xxxviii (Bury, IV, 164, note 6).

²⁰ See *Daedalus*, p. 30 (Clive), p. 65 (Bowersock), pp. 182–83 (Graubard), pp. 239–40 (Manuel). I am unpersuaded by the contention that Gibbon means "America" when he mentions "Armorica."

²¹ *DF*, ix (Bury, I, 218–20).

²² *DF*, ix (Bury, I, 222–23).

charge themselves only by violence;²³ war was their only activity, and honor—which was a fierce sense of personal though hardly of civil liberty—as near as they got to virtue.²⁴ If honor and liberty are precivil characteristics, Gibbon is devoid of serious nostalgia for the primitive virtues; he would rather have liked to believe in the authenticity of Ossian,²⁵ but he knew too well what Hume would have to say on the subject²⁶ and his own thesis commanded him to believe that virtue was civil and could exist only when the barbarian had been socialized into productive capacity and cooperative labor. He next considered the subject of barbarism in the very important chapter twenty-six, near the end of Volume Two, when the approach of the Goths obliged him to analyze the Huns and write a chapter on “the manners of the pastoral nations.”

The notion of a pastoral, shepherd, or nomad stage, preceding agriculture in the order of historical development, was one recently discovered by eighteenth-century social theorists.²⁷ Adam Smith, as Gibbon could have known, argued that this was the stage at which private ownership and specialization of function, class division and consequently government, first made their appearance;²⁸ but Gibbon put forward a very different evaluation. All shepherd societies, he argued, were essentially alike,²⁹ because they presented humanity at its nearest to the animal condition; since herdsmen did not labor but followed their grazing flocks, they developed no cultural individuality or diversity and their principal characteristic was a uniform mobility and ferocity in war. Gibbon was merely repeating in a cruder form the analysis he had already given of the Germans, and when he lays it down that this is the final analysis of barbarian society, to which by the nature of the case there can be nothing to add, we may feel that he is narrowing and indeed closing his equipment as a historian of culture. As a matter of fact, he is vastly enhancing his spatial capacity; chapter twenty-six is the prelude to the great panoramas of the later *Decline and Fall*, in which we see the

²³ *DF*, ix (Bury, I, 221).

²⁴ *DF*, ix (Bury, I, 225–26). Note (a) the closeness of this argument to Montesquieu's concept of *honneur*; (b) its application to the condition of women in barbaric and civilized society (Bury, I, 227–28).

²⁵ *DF*, vi (Bury, I, 129–30).

²⁶ See Hume's letter as given in Gibbon's *Memoirs of my Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (New York, 1966), p. 168.

²⁷ R. L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1975).

²⁸ Smith, *Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms*, I, 1, 2.

²⁹ *DF*, xxvi (Bury, III, 71).

interactions of the Desert with the Sown reaching all the way from Rome to China—Guignet’s *Histoire des Huns* is one of the seminal books in Gibbon’s reading—but as regards the history of Western Europe, the reduction of barbarism to a negatively characterized pastoralism does indeed enable him to carry out a gigantic and tendentious abridgment. As he describes, in chapters thirty-seven and thirty-eight, Germanic society taking shape in the conquered provinces of the West, the Gothic or Frankish settler is consistently presented as a hunter, shepherd,³⁰ and warrior, exploiting an agrarian society he could never shape for himself. The first feudal lords who appear in Merovingian Gaul are essentially hunters, who conduct *razzias* to supply themselves with serfs and cattle, and let land revert to forest to supply themselves with game.³¹

Gibbon is systematically if not avowedly destroying the myth of Gothic agrarian virtue, by whose means feudal society had so often been equated with the primitive republic of warrior freeholders. His modernism appears at its extreme when he virtually confronts nomadism with urbanism and permits agriculture, “the foundation of manufacturers,”³² to appear only as the precondition of the latter. A determination to have none of the fashionable thesis that commercial society had degenerated from an agricultural condition helps explain why the “General Observations” do not consider Europe as threatened from within, but only by a purely conceptual nomad danger from without. Agriculture appears in the “General Observations” in two roles only: first, as the instrument by which civilization eradicates savagery—the Russians are plowing up the steppe, English navigators are introducing useful plants and animals to Polynesia;³³ second, as the indestructible germ by which civilization survives catastrophe—since it depends neither on individual genius nor on complex social diversification, the peasant household is unlikely to forget what it has learned about the arts of tillage in even the greatest of disasters.³⁴ The happy peasant, virtuous because unspecialized, yet specialized above the level of savagery, has made his reappearance after being held back to the last page of Volume Three. Not even Gibbon could exorcise him from the eighteenth-century mind forever.

³⁰ *DF*, xxxviii (Bury, IV, 129, 132, 164).

³¹ *DF*, xxxviii (Bury, IV, 131–33).

³² *DF*, ii (Bury, I, 53).

³³ *DF*, “General Observations” (Bury, IV, 164, 168–69 and note 15).

³⁴ *DF*, “General Observations” (Bury, IV, 168).

The relation of barbarism to religion can be explored when we realize that the Enlightenment's sociology of barbarism, which Gibbon knew very well, was also a sociology of superstition, and rather less certainly of fanaticism; superstition and fanaticism being the two categories into which the *philosophes* distributed most religious phenomena. In Gibbon's early *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, and in the two masters to which that work chiefly refers, Fréret and Hume³⁵—we can read how the savage, idly and fancifully (because nonproductively) responding to the phenomena of experience, erects the multitude of gods and myths which make up the religions of superstition. Later in the progress of society appears the archaic philosopher, who endeavors to reduce religion from absurdity to rationality; the nature of abstract ideas and occult qualities to which the *philosophe* gives the name of metaphysics. Should the metaphysician excogitate as part of his system the otherwise reasonable concept of a single god, there will arise a theology—one of those fatal unions of superstition with metaphysics for which the correct term is fanaticism or enthusiasm.³⁶ This was the baleful legacy of Plato, whose error was to think the godhead a subject for systematic philosophy;³⁷ it was an error natural enough in the historical context, but not one to which the ancient city was condemned. As empire and commerce made possible the comparative study of gods and metaphysics, the philosopher-magistrates of the ruling city could reduce philosophy to that rational and tolerant skepticism, and methodical curiosity, which is all Gibbon ever means by the word.³⁸ The skepticism of the ruling few forms a happy enough partnership with the superstition of the unreflective many, because neither attribute much truth-status to what they say; but the metaphysicians persist outside the pale, fanatically asserting the truth of what they take to be philosophy. The Platonic legacy is the potential enemy of the Roman order.³⁹

Outside the natural history of religion altogether lie the great Semitic and Iranian⁴⁰ monotheisms, founded not on philosophy but on revelation. There is no sociological explanation of the prophet:

³⁵ For this relationship see Giarrizzo's volume and his essay in *Daedalus*.

³⁶ Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* was one of Gibbon's principal sources; and see the quotation from Fréret in *Miscellaneous Works*, IV, 16n.

³⁷ *DF*, ii (Bury, I, 30); xv (Bury, II, 76); xxi (Bury, II, 335–36).

³⁸ *DF*, ii, is Gibbon's chief account of this ancient *esprit philosophique*.

³⁹ See the account of the neo-Platonic revival at the end of *DF*, xiii (Bury, I, 392–93).

⁴⁰ *DF*, viii, is largely an account of Zoroastrianism (Bury, I, 197–203).

he must be either a madman or an impostor—preferably, because more rationally, the latter;⁴¹ but he erects a fanaticism more terrifying than that of the metaphysician, because it has no share in the progress of society from superstition to philosophy. The Jews, for whom Gibbon has the *philosophe's* total abhorrence, kept their god to themselves so jealously that the wars which destroyed them did nothing to the fabric of an empire in which they had no part;⁴² but they left behind them the dangerous knowledge that the unity of the godhead might be more convincingly asserted on the foundation of prophecy than on that of philosophy. The way was prepared for that union of Mosaic revelation with Platonic metaphysics which was what Gibbon really dreaded in Christianity.

Gibbon saw the Decline and Fall as the failure of ancient skepticism, but not merely as the triumph of popular superstition. In the history of Christianity, superstition played a late and ambivalent role; it was preceded in the patristic era by fanaticism and enthusiasm. At a time when the populace of the empire, robbed of belief in their gods by the belated discovery that their masters thought them ridiculous,⁴³ were becoming exposed to a variety of restatements of the Jewish and Persian revelations, the masters themselves—perhaps because their role as magistrates was ceasing to satisfy in the decay of the principate—were turning to a variety of neo-Platonic and Gnostic metaphysics; and this apostasy of the philosophers played a major role in both the triumph of Christianity and the Decline and Fall. The great heresies which destroyed both civil and ecclesiastical discipline were all, Gibbon emphasizes, of neo-Platonic and Gnostic origin;⁴⁴ and the same disastrous ways of thinking were responsible for the failure of Julian to restore philosophic magistracy and virtue. Julian was the inferior of Athanasius in these qualities, and Athanasius is one of a chain of Church Fathers—Ambrose,⁴⁵ Gregory the Great,⁴⁶ and John Chrysostom⁴⁷ are

⁴¹ See the accounts of Zoroaster, Odin (*DF*, x; Bury, I, 240–41) and especially Muhammad (*DF*, I; Bury, 333–96).

⁴² Gibbon's main account of Judaism is in *DF*, xv (Bury, II, 2–6). All other references to the Jews display occasional pity and unvarying contempt. Observe that Hadrian's Jewish war is not considered an exception to the general peace of the empire (*DF*, i; Bury, I, 29 and note). I suspect this footnote to be deliberate and not an afterthought; cf. Bowersock, *Daedalus*, p. 64, note 17.

⁴³ *DF*, xv (Bury, II, 55–56).

⁴⁴ *DF*, xxi (Bury, II, 336–54); xxxvii (Bury, IV, 95); xlvii (Bury, V, 96–106).

⁴⁵ *DF*, xxvii (Bury, III, 155–61, 174–76).

⁴⁶ *DF*, xlv (Bury, V, 33–38).

⁴⁷ *DF*, xxxii (Bury, III, 374–80).

others—of whom Gibbon writes with far more respect than mockery. The reason seems to be that these Fathers were leaders, effective and not without statesmanship, of their peoples in Alexandria, Milan, Rome, and Constantinople; the Christian republic—as Gibbon repeatedly calls it—was being led by Christian virtue.⁴⁸ It is true that this virtue was fanatical; both leaders and people were governed by a union of prophecy and metaphysics. It was anticivic and otherworldly, and could not be harnessed to the defense of the empire. But Gibbon was beginning to make use of Hume's distinction⁴⁹ between enthusiasm, which was fanatical and intolerant but drove men to assert their liberties against their rulers, and superstition, which was passive and law-abiding but disposed men to accept their rulers even when these were priests. Christian enthusiasm wins its greatest victory in *The Decline and Fall* when the temples of paganism are destroyed under the Theodosians; but almost immediately it is transformed into superstition, as the cults of saints and relics and shrines and miracles renew ancient polytheism in a Christian guise.⁵⁰

About all this it is evident that Gibbon had ambivalent feelings, and saw history as an ambivalent process. Religion as superstition had originally been an aspect of barbarism, and it would be possible to see its revival as a return to barbarism. In chapter thirty-seven Christianity is shown reaching its nadir in the form of monasticism, and it is emphasized that the monk, deprived of property, the reward of his labor, and all membership in society, regresses to an apathy very like that of the savage; we are even told that one or two monks were of shepherd origin, and that certain Egyptian solitaries grazed in the field like beasts.⁵¹ But in the same chapter Christianity is shown helping to convert the barbarians, and Ulfilas is called the Moses of his branch of the Goths because he taught them letters and led them across the Danube to fertile pastures where their nomadism might become settled.⁵² The image of agriculture has flashed across the page again, and it is used to distinguish between religion as a decivilizing and as a civilizing agency.

⁴⁸ For this language see *DF*, xv, passim; and cf. *DF*, xix (Bury, II, 328).

⁴⁹ Hume, *Essays*, "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm."

⁵⁰ *DF*, xxviii (Bury, III, 188–215).

⁵¹ Bury, IV, 70–73. The shepherds turned monk may be found at pp. 64, note 30, and 73 (Simeon Stylites).

⁵² Bury, IV, 76–77.

But religion as enthusiasm belonged to a more complex, because more civilized, phase in the historical process. Once Gibbon's knowledge of Hume reminded him that liberty and virtue might rest—as in the Reformation and the Puritan Revolution they had rested⁵³—on a foundation of fanaticism, he was bound to remember his modernist skepticism on the subject of virtue. There was something to be said for superstition, if it was compatible with the rule of enlightened and tolerant magistrates; but in recounting “the corruption of Christianity” (his own phrase)⁵⁴ in the Theodosian age, he had reached the brink of that standard Protestant polemic against the rule of superstition by priests, to which as a *philosophe* he was in no way indisposed. In the later volumes of *The Decline and Fall*, however, this polemic, while of course present, is relatively undeveloped. These volumes carry out a plan, laid down as far back as Volume One in 1776,⁵⁵ of pursuing the history of the Eastern Empire beyond the fall of the Western; we are not to look to them for a history of how modern Europe, that great republic of states, emerged from the *respublica christiana* which had succeeded the Roman empire. But there is an extraordinary chapter in Volume Five—chapter fifty-four—in which Gibbon deduces the history of Protestantism from origins not only Greek but neo-Platonic. The Gnostics begat the Bogomils, it seems, the Bogomils the Albigenians, the Albigenians the Western heretics in general, and these begat the Protestants.⁵⁶

Gibbon is examining the interweavings of the rational and the enthusiastic components in Protestantism. At the end of this chapter he indicates what he applauds in contemporary religion—the restoration of the Antonine Enlightenment as the rule of an undogmatic clergy over congregations who no longer know or much care what they are meant to believe—and what he fears: those “Arminians, Arians and Socinians . . . who preserve the name without the substance of religion, who indulge the licence without the temper of philosophy.” A footnote—and this was not the only time Gibbon did this—draws the attention of the civil magistrate to the teachings of Joseph Priestley.⁵⁷ It is not known what Gibbon said if he ever

⁵³ *DF*, xvi (Bury, II, 138–39).

⁵⁴ *DF*, xxxvii (Bury, IV, 57).

⁵⁵ Bury, I, v–vii.

⁵⁶ Bury, VI, 110–29.

⁵⁷ Bury, VI, 129, note 49. See also *Letters*, II, 320–23, and *Memoirs*, pp. 171–72.

heard that mobs, set on by magistrates, had destroyed Priestley's house in Birmingham, but this was just the sort of thing he feared. In Priestley's blend of unitarianism, materialism, and millennialism, he diagnosed the union of philosophy with fanaticism, and the structure of this chapter tells us that he saw Priestley as a second Arius, who would have been quite at home in the streets of fourth-century Alexandria. Gibbon as an undergraduate had been converted to Catholicism by reading Bossuet, and his return to Protestantism, even as a convenient home for an English *philosophe*, had never been free from uneasiness. He chose after 1781 to write the history of barbarism and religion in a new form: the history of how a prophet-legislator had civilized a pastoral people by teaching them enthusiasm for a religion of their own, and set the house of Islam at war with the city of Constantine.

Gibbon feared in Priestley exactly what Burke feared in Richard Price: the democratic fanaticism which they and many others thought was latent in English Dissent. After the Gordon Riots Gibbon wrote: "forty thousand Puritans, such as they might be in the time of Cromwell, have started out of their graves";⁵⁸ after the French Revolution, Burke wrote that nine-tenths of the Dissenters were devoted to its principles.⁵⁹ This analysis of *The Decline and Fall*—which disentangles some of its preoccupations without suggesting that these explain why it was written—indicates that Gibbon thought his world had laid the ghosts of virtue and corruption, but still went in fear of the spirit of fanaticism. The thesis of chapter fifty-four is not anti-Illuminist nonsense; there was enough neo-Platonism and Gnosticism abroad in the England of Blake, Shelley, and Coleridge to give us something to think about. But of the French Revolutionaries themselves, Gibbon said that they were fanatics, and also that they were barbarians; and he endorsed, like most gentlemen of his time, Burke's analysis and denunciation of the fanaticism of natural right.⁶⁰ But there was room for another analysis, which Gibbon might perhaps have written: that of the fanaticism of civic virtue. We cannot regret that Gibbon died when he did; to think of him eking out an exile in a London he never much

⁵⁸ *Letters*, II, 243.

⁵⁹ *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. T. W. Copeland (Cambridge, 1958–69), VI, 418–22.

⁶⁰ *Letters*, III, 321; for Burke, III, 216. Epithets such as "wolves," "savages," "cannibals" abound in Gibbon's correspondence in 1792.

liked, aware that some nasty French commissary was living in the villa at Lausanne, and obliged to meet Wilberforce at dinner parties, should convince us that the age of Pitt was no age for him. But we must wish we had his account of Robespierre at the Feast of the Supreme Being.

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